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# Florida voucher expansion bill advancing

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Public school teachers' pay and certification renewals would be linked to their students' test scores and it would be easier to fire them under a bill that passed Wednesday in the Florida Senate.

The chamber also passed a bill that would expand a private school voucher program.

Both passed the Republican-controlled Senate on largely party-line votes. Both are opposed by the Florida Education Association, the statewide teachers union, an important Democratic constituency group.

The bills next go to the House, where the voucher measure also expected to win approval, and then to Gov. Charlie Crist, who spoke at a pro-voucher rally outside the Capitol a couple hours after the vote. Sponsors said more than 5,000 attended, mostly voucher students from across Florida.

Union officials hope to persuade the House to soften the teacher personnel bill, which they say is an assault on their profession and violation of collective bargaining rights.

"This destructive and wide-ranging bill was formulated without any input from educators in the classroom and without any interest in making it palatable to teachers," said union President Andy Ford. "This bill has more to do with winning an election in November than in any attempts at improving education in Florida."

He noted the bill is sponsored by Sen. John Thrasher, who doubles as chairman of the Florida Republican Party. It's also supported by business groups and by Crist, now seeking the GOP nomination for the U.S. Senate.

"This is a bill that really focuses on trying to help children and encouraging better teachers," Crist said. "It pays better teachers more and that just seems like the right thing to do."

Thrasher's bill (SB 6) passed 21-17. All Democrats who were present voted against it, as did four Republicans.

The voucher bill (SB 2126) passed 27-11, also mostly with GOP support. Four Democrats voted for it while two Republicans opposed it.

A proposed state constitutional amendment to loosen class size limits (SJR 2), which also is opposed by the teachers union, is expected to be voted on Thursday.

Thrasher, of St. Augustine, denied he's got anything against teachers. He noted his daughter, who was in the gallery, is a former teacher and favors the bill.

"I do respect teachers," Thrasher said. He said his bill is nothing to fear and will "inspire teachers to get into the classroom and do a better job than they are doing even now."

The bill would replace an existing merit pay plan. Few school districts currently participate in it, due mainly to local union opposition. All districts would be required to join in the new system that would increase the pay of high-performing teachers.

Student learning gains on exams such as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT, would be the basis of more than half of the evaluation that would determine if a teacher gets a raise.

The bill originally would have taken state money away from districts that failed to comply and required them to raise local property taxes to make up the difference. That provision, though, was removed in committee.

Instead, the bill would provide \$900 million in state or federal money to cover the merit pay. The bill is designed to conform with Florida's application for up to \$1 billion in federal Race to the Top grant money, which also has a merit pay requirement.

Poor test results also could result in a teacher losing certification under the bill. Another provision would put teach-

ers on one-year contracts, meaning they could be fired without cause at the end of the school year.

"It seeks to weed out bad teachers by assuming all teachers are bad," said one opponent, Sen. Dan Gelber, a Miami Beach Democrat who is running for attorney general. "It takes a sledge hammer to the teaching profession."

The voucher bill by Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, raises the program's annual cap from \$118 million to \$140 million the first year and allows for incremental increases after that.

The vouchers are paid for through donations by businesses that then get credits on their corporate and insurance premium taxes. The bill would add three more tax credits on beverage taxes, oil and natural gas severance taxes and a form of sales tax paid by some businesses.

The bill also would add about \$140 to the value of the vouchers — now \$3,950 — in the first year and in steps after that until they reach 80 percent of what public schools spend, which would be at least \$5,500.

The program currently issues vouchers for about 27,000 children through a private organization called Step Up for Students.

Sen. Paula Dockery, a Lakeland Republican running for governor, voted against the teacher personnel bill. Her campaign then trumpeted her stand for teachers and "against those who demonize them."

Other Republicans who opposed the bill were Sens. Charlie Dean of Inverness, Dennis Jones of Seminole and Alex Villalobos of Miami. Jones and Villalobos also voted against the voucher bill.

Senate Democratic Leader Al Lawson of Tallahassee voted for the measure. Other Democrats who joined him were Sens. Jeremy Ring of Margate, Gary Siplin of Orlando and Chris Smith of Oakland Park.